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Haig Was Shot By His Own Smoking Gun

The full story can now be told of how a 19-year-old Nicaraguan made a world-class monkey out of Secretary of State Alexander Haig. Incredible as it may seem, Haig was largely responsible for his own humiliation.

Though Washington officials would like to forget it, most of the world remembers the carefully staged appearance of young Orlando Jose Tardencilla at a State Department press conference on March 12. The Sandinista stripling was supposed to be living proof that Nicaragua was aiding and abetting leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

Instead, of course, he told the world—live, on network TV, thoughtfully arranged by his American coaches—that his confessions incriminating the Nicaraguan regime had been wrung out of him by torture and were pure horsefeathers.

It was a bad day for Haig and his hardliners. All hands responsible for the fiasco attempted a hasty disengagement.

The State Department, caught red-handed, could only stammer and stutter in embarrassment. The CIA

at first piously proclaimed its innocence of any involvement in the pathetic affair. When the absurdity of this line became obvious, the spooks judiciously leaked a secret document to a trusted reporter, which tended to show that Tardencilla's interrogation by CIA experts had been painstakingly thorough.

The truth of the matter is this: American intelligence people knew about Tardencilla almost as soon as he was captured in January, 1981. Not only that, but some State Department officials greeted his confessions with open skepticism. "His story was a little shaky," one diplomatic source recalled. "That whole thing sounded phony."

What particularly turned off State Department people was Tardencilla's claim that he had received guerrilla training in Ethiopia. This made no sense. Nicaragua and Cuba have ample training facilities for El Salvador-bound guerrillas. Why send recruits all the way to Africa?

Eventually, the 1981 captive's supposed confession was filed and forgotten, as it should have been.

But early this year, Haig began claiming the United States had proof positive that the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua was deeply involved in El Salvador. He was challenged by Congress and the press to produce the "smoking gun."

It was at this point, apparently, that someone remembered the young Nicaraguan prisoner, whose confes-

sion so neatly matched the Haig theory of Sandinista involvement in El Salvador's civil war.

Fortunately for young Tardencilla, his Salvadoran captors had never quite given up hope of exploiting the confession they had extracted under torture. So they kept him alive against the day when his bizarre tale could be turned into useful propaganda.

My reporters Jon Lee Anderson and Lucette Lagnado reached Tardencilla by telephone in Nicaragua, where he is now a national hero. He told them what happened next:

Early in March, he was visited in his solitary prison cell by an American official. Tardencilla said the American told him he could either come to the United States and tell his story or be left to rot in jail.

It was an easy choice to make. The young Nicaraguan had been brutally tortured by the Salvadoran police and kept in solitary for virtually an entire year.

The day after the American's visit, Tardencilla was flown to Miami, then on to Washington.

The 19-year-old soldier, eager to improve his lot, told the interrogators what they wanted to hear. He guessed at specifics and came close enough to satisfy them.

So his interrogators proudly presented the young Nicaraguan as the "smoking gun" that their boss so desperately needed. And it blew up in Al Haig's face.